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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Hamilton Fish
and American Isolationism, 1920-1944

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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by

Richard Kay Hanks

June, 1971

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PREFACE

On February 10, 1971, a bipartisan group of senators announced the beginning of a movement to impose legislative restrictions on the war-making powers of the presidency. This particular effort was led by liberal Republican Senator Jacob Javits of New York and was only a reflection of a concern that has grown significantly in the past few years. More and more Americans are questioning the wisdom of the broad foreign-policy powers that have been rather firmly fixed in the presidency since World War II. Javits' movement has its own important significance for the 1970's. Yet it is notable as well because it parallels in some respects an extended period of debate over American foreign policy that occurred during the 1930's. Several things have changed since the "isolationists" fought with New Deal "internationalists" over what was the proper distribution of power between the presidency and Congress in regard to American foreign policy. The social milieu is completely different, the rhetoric has changed, and the personalities are new. The debate of the 1930's had reversed sides--the isolationists were generally categorized as conservative and the internationalists were aligned, to a greater or lesser degree, with the New Dealers. While the present movement to restrict presidential action is largely led and backed by the liberal forces of American politics, it, as the movement of the 1930's, draws support from people with widely divergent views concerning domestic affairs. The struggle is, as it was

then, between two branches of American government. The fear is, as it was then, that presidential discretion in conducting American foreign affairs leaves too much power in the hands of a single man.

In the debates of the 1930's few isolationists were more widely known than Hamilton Fish of New York. He was Republican spokesman in the House of Representatives on the nation's foreign affairs, and he was rarely reserved in his comments. In spite of his influence and often key role in the legislative struggles, Fish has been all but ignored in the historiography of the period. This work attempts to fill, at least in part, the need to discuss and evaluate Fish's impact on the country and its foreign affairs.

Because of the controversial nature of American "isolationism" it is necessary to describe the sense in which the word is used in this study. American isolationism was a very complex and varied movement that had antecedents that long precede the era discussed. Moreover, there were various degrees to which people were isolationist, often differing among themselves. Most isolationists agreed on the necessity for restricting American military commitments and political involvements outside of the Western Hemisphere. It is in this broad and general sense that I have used the word.¹ However,

¹For a more involved discussion of the word and its ramifications, see John Milton Cooper, Jr., The Vanity of Power, American Isolationism and the First World War, 1914-1917 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1969), pp. 1-4.

there are several ways to view the isolationist movement of the 1920's and the 1930's. Some authors insist that isolationism is a misnomer, since American economic relations with the rest of the world continued to grow and expand.² While their point may have validity, the movement as it is discussed here is viewed primarily from a political and military perspective. Use of the word "isolationist" is further complicated by the fact that it has so often been used as an epithet. It is loaded with inflammatory connotations and consequently difficult to use in a nonpejorative manner. Moreover, Fish himself objected to the term, feeling that it distorted his view of American foreign relations. Nonetheless, the word was such a pervasive part of the language of the period that I have used it with some frequency in the following pages.

In the course of my research and writing, I have benefited from the assistance of several institutions and individuals. The University of California, Riverside, provided financial support that greatly reduced the burden of travel to Eastern sources. I am indebted as well to the staffs of the following research facilities: the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford

²See for example William Appleman Williams, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (rev. ed.; New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1962), especially pp. 160-200; the economic side of Roosevelt's policies is discussed by Lloyd C. Gardner, Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1964).

University, the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, the University of Illinois Library at Urbana, the Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan, the Oral History Research Project of Columbia University; and the government documents and inter-library loan divisions of the University of California at Riverside Library. Several individuals have aided my work. Mr. Hamilton Fish and Mrs. Lewis (Sophia) Mumford generously provided me with their recollections of the period. Also, I am happy to acknowledge the assistance of my colleagues, Les Owens, Ronald Quinn, and Peter Wang; the criticism and suggestions of Professors Van Perkins, Hal Bridges, and Alan Green; and the special aid of my wife Sherry in researching, writing, and typing this manuscript.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Hamilton Fish, grandson of Grant's famous secretary of state, was the congressman from New York's Twenty-Sixth District from 1920 to 1944. He was most significant as a leader of the isolationist forces in the House of Representatives during the New Deal period. Fish's isolationism was largely a product of his participation in the First World War. His conduct in Europe made him an international war hero, but the experience was so repulsive that he spent many of his subsequent years groping for a way to prevent the future participation of the United States in any war not in direct

defense of the hemisphere. During the 1920's, Fish was attracted to a wide variety of anti-war causes and was a central figure in the development of the concept of legislating against war. After 1931, he concentrated his effort on limiting the foreign policy powers of the presidency while expanding the role of Congress. As a result of the sweeping Democratic victory of 1932, Fish became the ranking Republican member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and a major party spokesman on foreign relations. He reached his greatest national prominence in the years immediately preceding American entry into the Second World War. In 1939, in a desperate effort to avoid the onrushing war, Fish went to Europe to attempt personally to stem the crisis over Danzig. Unsuccessful, and ridiculed in many American circles, he returned to help lead the fight against such measures as the Neutrality Act of 1939 and the Selective Service Act of 1940. Rather than risk war, Fish was prepared to acquiesce in German expansion into Eastern Europe and Japanese control of most of Asia.

Fish was shaken by the fall of France, and his hostility to some of the aid to Britain was lessened as a result. However, he bitterly opposed lend-lease because of the power it surrendered to Roosevelt. Fish remained firm throughout his career on the inadvisability of any American intervention in the Far East. By the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, all important isolationist legislation had been dismantled by the internationalist forces and Fish was under attack for having collaborated with agents of the German government in

their attempt to propagandize the American people against involvement in the European war. While there has never been any evidence that implicates Fish directly in a Nazi design, it is true that he was careless in his use of the franking privilege and in the scrutiny that he applied to his personal activities. The charges of Nazi collaboration eroded his large following in New York and the country, but he continued to win re-election until his district was gerrymandered out of existence in 1944.

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CHAPTER I

A BULL MOOSE AS NEW DEAL CRITIC

The nasal-toned baritone voice of New York's Hamilton Fish was a familiar component of the American scene by 1941. With the maturation of radio in the 1930's as a political force, Fish was able to enter millions of American homes. From New England to California, Americans listened to the New York aristocrat debate with many of the nation's most prominent intellectuals and politicians. In the years before the Second World War, Fish became a significant spokesman for hard-core isolationists who unalterably opposed their country's participation in a new European war. It was in this role that Fish made his greatest impact upon American history. It was also in this role that he was to become one of the most controversial men of his period, leaving his public office under a barrage of charges that forced even the leadership of his own party to encourage his defeat. But, if it was Fish's isolationism that gave him his greatest political power and his greatest political problems, it should not completely obscure the fact that he was a significant opposition voice on domestic issues. He was one of Franklin Roosevelt's most virulent and corrosive critics. He was a spokesman for the substantial number of Americans who were convinced that New Deal innovations and a power-hungry president were visiting the pestilence of ruin upon the American nation, its freedoms, its values,

and its collective soul.

Fish's career in the Congress offered many striking contrasts. Perhaps the greatest of these was the fact that he began his career in politics as a follower of Theodore Roosevelt, the "New Nationalism," and the Bull Moose or Progressive party. Fish always considered himself a liberal and was a frequent contributor to the substantial rhetoric that bemoaned the power and influence of the "old guard" within the Republican party. By 1944, however, Fish's isolationism and New Deal criticism had firmly established him in the public mind as one of the most conservative, if not reactionary, figures in his party. Similarly striking was the contrast between his red-baiting anti-radicalism and his repeated speeches for the protection of civil rights. Of the several influences that helped to explain these contrasts, one of the most important was his background.

Personal Background

Franklin D. Roosevelt's euphonious phrase in the election of 1940 about the counterfeit firm of "Martin, Barton and Fish" gave but another recognition to a man and a family already well-known to generations of Americans.¹ The name of Hamilton Fish had long since made its mark on

¹Roosevelt initiated this famous phrase in a campaign address at Madison Square Garden in New York City, October 28, 1940. It was quickly picked up by the crowds and became a favorite slogan in the campaign. For the text of the speech, see Franklin D. Roosevelt, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, ed. S.I. Rosenman (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), IX, pp. 499-510. Bruce Barton was also a New York congressman.

the American horizon as belonging to one of New York State's most prominent and respected families. In fact, the Fish family was almost as old as the English colonies in America. They had first arrived in the New World in 1634, founding Sandwich, the first town on Cape Cod. By the time Fish's great grandfather, Nicholas Fish, was born in 1758, the family was of substantial means, being important merchants and landholders in upper New York. Nicholas Fish was a colonel in the Revolutionary Army and fought along-side Washington and Lafayette. This association bequeathed to the great grandson a deep interest in the Revolutionary War.² Nicholas was also an intimate friend of Alexander Hamilton and served as executor of the estate after Hamilton's death. It was in honor of this friendship that Nicholas named his third son, Fish's grandfather, Hamilton Fish. Nicholas's wife, Elizabeth Stuyvesant Fish was from at least as prominent a line, being a direct descendent of the last Dutch governor of New York, Peter Stuyvesant.

Fish's grandfather, the first Hamilton Fish, had a long and distinguished public career. He served as a member of the United States House of Representatives, as governor

²A good treatment of the early Fish family can be found in Allan Nevins, Hamilton Fish: The Inner History of the Grant Administration (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1957), pp. 5-10. Shorter sketches of the Fish family can be found in "How Well Do You Know Your Congressman," undated campaign tract published for the 1944 campaign, Fish Papers, New York, New York. Fish still retains possession of his papers. This document is from a small amount of material to which Fish allowed the author access.

of the state of New York, as a United States senator, and for eight years as the secretary of state for President U.S. Grant.³ The son of this Hamilton Fish, the second man to carry the name and the father of the Hamilton Fish of the 1930's, was also a member of Congress, but was best known for his long tenure as speaker of the New York Assembly. This ancestry was an important aspect of Fish's political make-up. He was proud of his aristocratic lineage and was keenly aware of the family's tradition of public service. A feeling of noblesse oblige that stemmed from this heritage was most pronounced in Fish's deep concern for civil rights.⁴

Born on December 7, 1888, the third Hamilton Fish lived his early life in the family's ancestral home on the banks of the Hudson River in New York's Putnam County near the home of Franklin Roosevelt. Fish's early schooling was at St. Marks. At the age of 20, after only three years, young Fish graduated from Harvard University cum laude, with a degree in history and government. He gained his first national attention while at Harvard for his athletic ability. In 1908 and 1909, he was named by Walter Camp to his "all-America" team, and was the only Harvard man placed by Camp on his "All-Time All-America eleven."⁵ Fish continued at

³Nevins, Hamilton Fish, provides a complete biography. Nevins says the family arrived in 1634; Fish, in a speech in Boston in 1943, said it was 1637. Congressional Record, Appendix, p. 1282, March 18, 1943.

⁴See below.

⁵The football career is discussed by Alexander Weyand, Football Immortals (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962),

Harvard in the law school and at graduation in 1911 went to work first for a construction company, and later for an insurance firm.⁶

As might be surmised from Fish's athletic career, he was and is physically a big man. With broad and massive shoulders, he stood six feet four inches and weighed over two-hundred well distributed pounds. He had thick, black hair and full, bushy eyebrows which set off a face usually occasioned by a stern, troubled look. Fish was always striking in a crowd and in later years it was noted that he never looked his age.⁷

The New York State Progressive

Statecraft was a family predilection and young Fish had barely terminated his stay at Harvard before he became involved in local affairs. He entered New York politics in early 1912 as the progressive political forces were approaching

pp. 52-58. Weyand has an interesting story about Fish as a player. In Fish's senior year he was quarterbacked by a sophomore and some critics felt that Harvard's showing for the year was hurt because of it. Fish, a national star, supposedly resented being led by the younger man. The result was that he often tried to overrule his signals and in so doing created a fair amount of confusion on the field.

⁶Additional material may be found in the short articles on Fish by John Richmond, "Hamilton Fish, Superpatriot," American Mercury, LII (April, 1941), pp. 440-441; and Richard Nelson Current, "Hamilton Fish, 'Crusading Isolationist,'" Public Men in and Out of Office, ed. John Thomas Salter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1946), pp. 212-214.

⁷Ibid.; interview with Hamilton Fish, April 28, 1970, in New York City.

their period of greatest national strength. Fish identified with the reform factions of the Republican party and quickly involved himself in the fight to bring a greater degree of democratization to the American political process. As was the case with most progressive politicians, he was greatly concerned with the disproportionate power of party bosses. In his fight against these bosses and their entrenched machines, he developed an association and friendship with another young New York politician--Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt was at that time a Democratic senator in the New York State Legislature.

Early in 1912, Fish proposed to Roosevelt that they initiate the formation of a "direct primary league" in each assembly district in their respective parties. Fish wanted petitions circulated within the two parties pledging the signer to support no candidate who was not committed to the repeal of the present law and the substitution of a "pure direct primary." Fish felt that a few hundred signatures in each district would "control the situation."⁸ Roosevelt responded that the idea was "an excellent one" and was soon at work mapping out the assembly districts and compiling lists of names. Fish also worked with Roosevelt to counter "old guard" Democrats who threatened Roosevelt's seat in the state senate.⁹

⁸Hamilton Fish to Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 25, 1912, in Roosevelt Papers; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library; Hyde Park, New York.

⁹Roosevelt to Fish, March 27, 1912. In a letter dated

Fish's identity at this time, as through all of his career, was with Theodore Roosevelt, and the similarity of their philosophical outlook was striking. Fish viewed industrial growth and governmental action essentially the same as TR categorized them in the election of 1912. Corporate giantism and the rise of monopolies and oligopolies were an acceptable and even beneficial industrial development. However, it was the obligation of the government to control and regulate these institutions so that they did not violate the public interest. This point of view was the essence of the "New Nationalism" and it dominated Fish's thinking about government and business for the entire time he was in politics. Fish's ideological similarity to Roosevelt was also apparent in the former's strong and enduring commitment to the protective tariff, in his work for social justice legislation, and in his belief that property rights must always be held subservient to human rights.¹⁰

When TR failed to win the Republican nomination for

February 8, 1913, Fish suggested to FDR the structure of the political ring that controlled the area and offered procedures for Roosevelt to follow to secure his position. Correspondence also suggests that FDR did some speaking for Fish in both 1913 and 1914. See Fish to Roosevelt, September 12, 1913; and Roosevelt to Fish, July 20, 1914, Roosevelt Papers. Also, Frank Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt, The Apprenticeship (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1952), p. 179.

¹⁰Theodore Roosevelt's general ideological outlook is described by George Mowry, The Era of Theodore Roosevelt and The Birth of Modern America, 1900-1912 (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 108-115, 270-273. Fish's New Nationalism, at least in its rhetorical form, is documented in the New York Times, July 7, 1929, p. 9:1; and March 10, 1937, p. 16:3.

the presidency in 1912, Fish followed him into the Progressive party and became the Bull Moose chairman for Putnam County.¹¹ In 1913, Fish made his first bid for public office. He won election to the New York Assembly over the entrenched "Boss of Putnam County," John R. Yale, on a fusion ticket of the Progressive and Democratic parties. This fusion ticket was again successful the following year against Yale, with the help of Democrats like Franklin Roosevelt.¹² In that year, Fish was one of only two Progressives elected in the entire state. By 1915, he was the only Progressive party member in the assembly. Fish continued to win ~~re~~-election until he left in 1917 for the war.¹³

During his stay in the New York Assembly, Fish pursued a wide variety of progressive goals. Continuing his interest in electoral reform, he now worked for a direct presidential primary and for the adoption of regular election machinery in the party primaries.¹⁴ He was also concerned with social reform. In this context, he won appointment to the newly

¹¹New York Times, August 22, 1913, p. 2:6. Fish's friendship with Theodore Roosevelt is evident in ibid., March 19, 1919, p. 24:3.

¹²Yale had held the seat for a dozen years and as a member of the assembly had closely allied with the inner ring during the "Black Horse Cavalry Days"; see ibid., November 4, 1914, p. 2:3; November 5, 1913, p. 4:3. It is interesting that the rivalry between Fish and Yale had ended by 1923 when the New York Times, April 9, 1923, p. 7:1, noted that Yale was a political follower of Fish.

¹³Ibid., November 4, 1914, p. 2:3; October 13, 1916, p. 13:4.

¹⁴Ibid., January 27, 1915, p. 11:2.

established Committee on Social Welfare, supported a widow's pension bill,¹⁵ and in cooperation with Thomas Mott Osbourne, warden of Sing Sing Prison, introduced several bills for penal reform. Fish's reform bills called for indeterminate sentences for all convicts except those guilty of murder in the first or second degree, broadened the eligibility for parole, and proposed changes in the parole machinery.¹⁶ In addition, Fish fought a bill that would have ended the intervention of the state compensation commission in claims paid by employers to injured workmen.¹⁷ He charged that lobbyists for insurance companies were responsible for the zeal of the Republican leaders for the bill and doggedly stuck by his call for an investigation of such "improper influences" even after the Republicans were able to "buy off" other criticism.¹⁸

¹⁵Ibid., January 14, 1915, p. 8:5; Fish, "The Challenge of the Aged," North American Review, CCXXIX (January, 1930), p. 94.

¹⁶New York Times, March 16, 1915, p. 5:1. In early 1916 there was a controversy and charges to the effect that Osbourne had been removed and a reform ring within the state prison system broken by the superintendent of prisons, John B. Riley. Fish charged that Osbourne was the victim of a "dastardly frame-up" while the governor charged Riley with breaking up the reform ring. See New York Times, January 11, 1916, p. 6:2; February 23, 1916, p. 1:2.

¹⁷Ibid., March 19, 1915, p. 1:3. The bill passed anyway.

¹⁸Ibid., Fish and John Leo Sullivan made the charge. While Fish refused to yield, Sullivan made an apology on the floor and retracted his charges after a closed door meeting with Speaker Thaddeus Sweet and Majority Leader Harold J. Hinman. The New York Times reported that the speakership was the apparent price for Sullivan's recantation. Fish followed with a speech in which he repeated his charges and continued the call for investigation. As a part of his case,

As the above incident suggests, another favorite target of the young Fish was political corruption. Coupled with his fight against the powerful bosses of the party machines, he went after junketing politicians. Especially offensive to him were special, weekend assembly committee meetings in New York City which he felt had no more reason to be held than the desire of the committeemen for a weekend out of Albany at state expense.¹⁹

Fish also demonstrated in these early years a characteristic that was to be apparent throughout his public career: an adeptness for finding and somehow positioning himself in the center of controversy. An example of this was Fish's quickly developed antagonism to the Republican speaker of the assembly, Thaddeus Sweet. In 1915, Sweet refused Fish's request to be removed from the assembly's Excise Committee. Fish obtained and read to the assembly letters from Speaker Champ Clark of the House of Representatives and his own father, a former speaker of the New York Assembly. Both letters suggested that Sweet's decision was certainly extraordinary and without any known precedent. A reporter for the New York Times suggested that Speaker Sweet found the challenge more

Fish read a letter he had received from Theodore Roosevelt affirming his position that the bill was a backward step and an aid to the casualty companies. Speaker Sweet was apparently pale as Fish finished his speech. See ibid., March 24, 1915, p. 1:3; also March 25, 1915, p. 6:3.

¹⁹See the Fish attack on the Pan Pacific Exposition trip, ibid., January 25, 1916, p. 20:1; for the attack on the trips to New York, see ibid., January 26, 1916, p. 22:2.

than a little perturbing.²⁰ Sweet also could not have been very pleased with Fish's allegations about the Republican leadership's corruption and misuse of public funds. Sweet, at a euphoric moment at the end of legislative business in 1915, told a reporter, perhaps symbolically, that he was even full of good will toward the "gentleman from Putnam."²¹

Fish's terms in the New York State Legislature document his commitment to the wide variety of reforms sought by the progressive forces of the day. He was aggressive, idealistic and uncompromising in his determination to make government more directly responsive to control by the people, to make it more sensitive and responsive to questions of social justice, and to curtail political corruption and waste. There could be little doubt that at this stage of his career he was a reformer and a progressive of established credentials.

The First World War

Fish's political career was interrupted in 1917 by the American declaration of war against the Central Powers. During 1916, Fish had aligned with his party leader and mentor, Theodore Roosevelt, in the debate over American preparedness. Roosevelt, sensing American weakness, argued for a significant expansion of the country's military forces. He also tried to convince his fellow Americans that crucial American interests

²⁰ Ibid., February 2, 1915, p. 5:1.

²¹ Ibid., April 26, 1915, p. 16:1.

were at stake in the European conflict. Fish's personal contribution to the preparedness effort was his participation in national guard war games in Plattsburg, New York, in July and September, 1916.²²

Fish's special interest, however, was in the organization and preparation of a Negro regiment of New York National Guard troops. Fish eventually obtained permission to take this regiment of troops to France.²³ Because there were not enough black troops to create an entire division, and because the white American divisions would not accept the Negro troops, Fish's regiment was attached to the French Army.²⁴ Fish was full of praise for his troops and approved the affiliation with the French for the "incomparable advantage" of their "instructions and experience." In a condescending, yet perhaps advanced attitude considering the time, Fish stated that he was "a great believer in the fighting quality of the educated Negro, provided he is well led."²⁵ He felt that if the regiment failed to make a "splendid record, it will not be the fault of the men." In a letter home, he even predicted that if the censorship regulations were abolished, his black

²²Ibid., July 15, 1916, p. 16:4; September 9, 1916, p. 20:5.

²³"How Well Do You Know Your Congressman," Fish Papers; Current, "Hamilton Fish," pp. 213-214.

²⁴Fish discussed the assignment in an interview with the Newburgh Evening News (New York), October 21, 1969.

²⁵Fish's letter to his father was published in the New York Times, May 5, 1918, V, p. 2:1.